

## Problematics and Paradigms in Historicizing the Overseas Chinese in the Nineteenth- and Twentieth-century Straits and Burma

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### Introduction

In my recent fieldwork in Lower Burma and the Straits of Melaka, I found that the standard approaches to studying the 'Overseas Chinese' in western Southeast Asia have several important weaknesses. One weakness has been the failure to problematize the tendency to structure analyses of Overseas Chinese along the contemporary boundaries of contemporary nation-states (i.e. "the Chinese in Burma," "the Chinese in Thailand," and so on). This reflects not simply an easy way of dividing a large research project, but also pays homage to the perceived power of the nation-state and thus the peculiar existence of migrant groups within each different nation-state. Often, studies of an ethnic group that transcends, historically, contemporary state boundaries will be approached more carefully, but with the same boundaries of state affecting analysis through the division of chapters according to a nation-state checklist or a narrative heavily coded by its relation to the nation-states in the analysis (Suryadinata 1997). Furthermore, Overseas Chinese communities 'within a state' often have internal divisions that are invisible to the state-centred narrative. This is true, for example, of the Yangon (Rangoon)-based 'Chinese in Burma' who stress that they and the Yunnanese in Upper Burma have few interactions and a different socio-economic place in Burma and certainly cannot be considered as one community.<sup>2</sup>

More recently, the pervasive energies of globalisation and transnationalism have helped to encourage historians to look beyond the boundaries of the nation-state and to elucidate connectivities that are severed or bifurcated by the nation-state 'cookie cutter.' These studies, however, tend to dwell of marginal spaces and over-generalities, producing some of the same kinds of clichés that they intended to interrogate in the first place, or else to generalize and produce a historically undifferentiated and essentialist Overseas Chinese identity. In this paper, I will approach the Overseas Chinese in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Lower Burma and Penang from a non-state-centred perspective, in order to see how this approach can explain the phenomenon of continued connectivities between the Overseas Chinese of Penang and Lower Burma after Penang was eclipsed by Singapore and how this reflects on Overseas Chinese identity in Lower Burma and the Straits Settlements.

This paper is structured as follows. I will first describe the phenomenon of continued connectivities between the Overseas Chinese of Lower Burma and Penang. Following this, I examine recent theoretical approaches by Takeshi Hamashita and Wang Gungwu to understanding the Overseas Chinese in a broader historical framework. I then turn to my case study of Penang-Lower Burma Overseas Chinese interactions. My conclusion will draw together the theoretical approaches and empirical data in order to draw both into broader theoretical discussions of the Overseas Chinese.

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## I One Phenomenon or Two Perspectives?

The state-centered approach portrays Penang as an economic backwater in a Malaysian historical context: The prevailing literature stresses the role of Singapore as the mediating port between colonial Burma (and other colonies) and the Southeastern China market in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Although Penang had such a role early in the nineteenth century, it slips out of the historical narrative regarding the China trade after the emergence of the colony of Singapore, for which Penang is said to have become a "feeder port" (Wong 1961, 86). Reflecting, in part, current political configurations, Penang has thus been pulled into Malaysian history, while Singapore has merited a special place in Malayan history prior to the 1960s, and separate treatment today. As the standard study of nineteenth-century Singapore trade with China explains:

"[t]he location of Penang at the northern end of the Straits of Malacca was far inferior to that of Singapore, being open to fewer countries and forming a depot only for the northern ports of Sumatra and the west coast of the Malay Peninsula" (Wong 1961, 86).

This observation may be true from the perspective of the 'China trade' (which refers to a specific commercial and colonial construct not synonymous with either the 'Chinese trade' or even with the trade between China and Southeast Asia).

This does not mean, however, that Penang was eclipsed in all ways, commercial or otherwise, by Singapore or that this register was utilized by the Chinese of Burma and Penang, or even by many others who also 'have history' and were historical actors. It does mean that we need to contextualize the China trade when we look at the Overseas Chinese of Lower Burma and Penang, especially in the nineteenth century. The state-centred approach, for example, has no place for the importance of the Penang-Burma connection in the development of both the Burma and Straits economy in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, nor does it hint at the possibility that the Overseas Chinese of Penang did not see themselves as primarily tied to the Singapore-China trade.

Archival materials, Chinese merchant biographies, newspaper records, and the fragments of historical memory in religious edifices, however, suggest an important place and significant growth in Penang's economic and social interaction with Burma and in the emergence of Lower Burma's Chinese population. An analysis of several dozen early twentieth-century Overseas Chinese merchants reveals a strong commercial relationship between Penang and Lower Burma that does not appear in the prevailing historiography. The list of thirty-three of Rangoon's most important nineteenth-century Chinese merchants (see Table 1 in Appendix), for example, indicates that thirty-three percent were born at Penang, stayed at Penang for several years as an intermediary stop from Southeastern China to Burma, or moved to Penang after having built their fortune in Burma. The same list indicates that only nine percent had the same relationship with Singapore. Furthermore, Table 1 does not reflect additional strong evidence of other relationships between the Chinese commercial men of Lower Burma and Penang, including marriage relationships, educational exchanges, business transactions, and religious (Buddhist) interaction.<sup>3</sup> This artificiality of the division between the Straits and Lower Burma was not invisible to those involved. The political divisions between Lower Burma and the Straits were seen as inappropriate for a number of reasons. As one editor suggested in July 1900:

"What might be a gain to Burma is incorporation in a new empire stretching from Arakan down to Singapore, and governed, not as a Crown Colony but on the same lines as India is. Burma would then be politically bound up with countries more akin to her in every way than India is, and would not be so liable to be misunderstood at headquarters" (RG 23 July 1900, p. 4).

Although neither the Overseas Chinese nor the commercial interrelationship between the Straits and Lower Burma are referred to here, it would be difficult to suggest what other kinds of similarities this observer had in mind in suggesting the similarities between Lower Burma and the Straits.

## II Problems and Paradigms

Two recent works that discuss the Overseas Chinese in Southeast Asia in general suggest two different perspectives on how we should view the place of China (Chinese) when we talk about non-China Asia (Asians). First, Takeshi Hamashita looks to the Asian past for its 'internal dynamism' as a way to counter a European/American-centred view of Asian history. For Hamashita, this internal dynamism is derived at least partly from the long-term China-centred state system. That is, the Asian past has a definite, stable base which Hamashita calls the "Sinocentric world." Asia, Hamashita explains, has been politically (and economically) ordered for centuries around the China state tribute system as both tributaries to China and as participants in this 'Asian system' (Hamashita 1997). Hamashita goes further and suggests that, in the case of Overseas Chinese, community unity emerged and the Chinese identity was strengthened by the Overseas Chinese experience as an "ethnic minority" in colonial-dominated Asia. As Hamashita explains:

"Chinese nationalism was created in the periphery among the overseas Chinese, where attachment to China and national consciousness was strong, not in the center. Overseas Chinese have also maintained the historical ideal of a wider Sinocentric regionalism derived from the traditional idea of a 'Middle Kingdom' and loosely related to long-term tribute relations in East and Southeast Asia" (Hamashita 1997, p. 135).

Hamashita's stress, then, is upon the role of the 'state' of China as a focal-point of emerging Chinese identities on the periphery, among the Overseas Chinese.

A second perspective is offered by Wang Gungwu (2000). Wang looks not so much at the state of China, but rather at the role of Chinese traditions and several regional experiences as focal points for Overseas Chinese. Wang suggests that (1) education and (2) several key historical events have played an important role in the development of the Chinese portion of the Overseas Chinese identity. The Chinese identity, he implies, was not definite or well defined early on. He suggests that for many under-educated Chinese migrants identities were particularist and derived from home provincial or village ties rather than affiliation, or a sense of belonging-ness, to an abstract "Chinese" identity. In the twentieth century, however, Chinese-ness through education and historical events was rooted in the emergence of Chinese nationalism. Furthermore, Overseas Chinese today have a range of options due to their transnational identities. These options include (1) a Chinese national identity, (2) a Southeast Asian national identity, or (3) an un-national universalist identity made possible by cultural globalisation (Wang 2000).

Both views have different levels of analysis and different perspectives on the state. Hamashita, for example, looks mainly at the "state" in Chinese-ness among Overseas Chinese. Wang, however, looks at civilization and experience. Despite these differences, I think the things Wang and Hamashita are talking about really raise the same question and both are relevant to the phenomenon I referred to above. Both views, for example, look differently on the place of modern China and Chinese-ness in general Asian history (Hamashita really offers us a timeless China, while Wang offers us a complex twentieth-century "Chinese-ness" and a dynamic one at that). But both views raise the same question: how much should we allow state-centred historical narratives to form our historical perspectives? Hamashita, for example, places at the centre of his 'looking at Asia from within Asia' approach an essentially state system. Wang Gungwu, on the other hand, does not include the state in his discussion prior to the twentieth-century, at

which time, both China and Southeast Asian states play a critical role in providing the context for the Overseas Chinese view of the past. This approach expands upon the strengths and insight of one of Wang's earlier articles, "Merchants Without empire: the Hokkien Sojourning Communities," which, although not stressing its relevance to broader issues of state-centred narratives, still pointed to an essentially non-state-centred narrative of a specific Chinese migrant group, the Hokkien speakers of coastal Fujien province and their experiences as migrant merchants in the Nanyang (Wang 1990).

The issue of state-centred narratives has been raised elsewhere. Prasenjit Duara, for example, has written extensively on the necessity of understanding the interplay between state-centred and local-centred historical narratives (Duara 1995). But the question has not been asked regarding the Overseas Chinese in western Southeast Asia. Furthermore, there is a need to look beyond overgeneralizations of the "Overseas Chinese" and refocus our lenses upon specific Chinese merchants and their specific activities in order to enable us to see a more accurate picture of what was occurring.<sup>4</sup> In terms of explaining the phenomenon I have outlined above, how can looking beyond state-centred narratives (both China-centred and Southeast Asia-centred) help us to explain the Penang-Burma interrelationship as well as its absence in the prevailing historiography?

### III The Penang-Burma Connection

Over the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Lower Burma's and Penang's Overseas Chinese interacted substantially in many ways. The easiest ways to document this interaction are, of course, trade relationships. It is more difficult, though not impossible, to ferret out social relationships and cultural interaction, requiring as an analytical approach that the analyses of social relationships and trade relationships among the Overseas Chinese of Penang and Burma be dealt with simultaneously. In this section, I will attempt to shed some light on several kinds of Penang-Lower Burma Overseas Chinese relationships. In order to do so, however, one must first step away from the idea of a pre-Malaysia Malaysia-centred Straits as well as from the stress on Singapore's role as the chief entrepot for the China-trade, as the hegemonic conduit of people and material in the nineteenth- and early twentieth-centuries. Much of this perspective is the heritage of British merchants and colonial interests who read the Straits and Lower Burma by a register that fit colonial desires and expectations. Indeed, as early as 1828, British interests had already begun to push Penang out of the commercial picture of the Straits based on the shipping between China and Singapore.<sup>5</sup> By the mid-1840s, British observers felt that this process was complete (See, for example, PGSC 20 July 1844, p. 1). However accurate these assertions may be, focusing upon the "centre," political or economic, blinds the view of other relationships that, given another context, may yield more fruitful understandings of particular communities of Overseas Chinese and their activities outside of Singapore. In this section, I will look at three spheres of Lower Burma-Penang interactions: the 'bird trade', tin-mining, and the rice-trade.

#### A. the 'Bird trade'

The 'bird trade' was an important part of the early commercial prosperity of the Penang Overseas Chinese. I use the 'bird trade' here as a simple means of referring to the gathering, shipment, and sale by Overseas Chinese merchants of various bird-related products such as birds' nests and birds' skins. Birds' nest were, as they are today, considered a delicacy by many Southeastern Chinese, especially in the form of birds' nest soup. Birds' skins, on the other hand, were used by the Overseas Chinese in the nineteenth-century Straits for decorating ceremonial dresses (PRM, 19 March 1828, p. 1). Especially from the late 1820s, information on the 'bird trade' suggests that Overseas Chinese settlement may have followed this trade along the rimlands of the Bay of Martaban. In any case, this economic activity being gauged by



perspectives pointing directly to the emergence of Singapore as the Straits' economic hegemonic centre, has not been stressed as an important link between Burma and Penang in the nineteenth centuries (again, a link dominated by the Overseas Chinese).

The Penang connection may explain the curious appearance of Chinese junks in the late 1830s on the eastern coasts of the Bay of Bengal. The economy of the British colony of western Burma, for example, was sparked in part by Chinese junks which came by Arakan to procure supplies of special types of fish and edible birds' nests. Arakanese fishermen began to gather these supplies specifically for the annual arrival of these Chinese junks (see Spry 1841, 143). I extrapolate from evidence of the 'bird trade' connecting the Lower Burmese coast with Penang (PRM, 19 March 1828, p. 1) to suggest that the Chinese junks in the present case were also connected to Penang. Chinese settlement in Lower Burma also likely followed, initially, the 'bird trade.' By 1828, for example, "a few" Chinese had settled around Tavoy (PRM 18 June 1828, p. 2). In view of other evidence, as I will explain, this may not be a sufficient explanation for the rebirth of Overseas Chinese settlement in Lower Burma in the early nineteenth century. As I discuss below, tin-mining and the rice trade may also provide some answers.

The trade in birds' skins and feathers at Penang was highly profitable. One junk-load of birds' skins brought from Lower Burma (Tavoy) to Penang in 1828, for example, sold 100,000 birds' skins "in feather" for forty dollars per hundred, or forty thousand Spanish dollars altogether, a substantial sum in this period (PRM, 19 March 1828, p. 1). White rice, by comparison, might only bring between forty-five dollars for cargo standard or fifty or sixty for white rice in the early-mid-nineteenth century Straits. Shipping records indicate that birds' feathers, other bird products, and fish — though still important as cargo from Lower Burma to Penang up through the 1840s — had clearly been overshadowed by western Burmese rice by the mid-1840s. A glance at the cargoes of ships unloading at Penang from Burma during one week in early April 1844 gives some indication of this. Six ships unloaded during this week: (1) the *Joy Monglah* from western Burma with 87 coyans of rice; (2) the *China Merchant* from western Burma with 22 coyans of rice, 4000 birds' feathers, and four ponies; (3) the *Cecilia* from western Burma with 64 coyans of rice; (4) the *Weraff* from western Burma with 14, 100 arries of rice and a load of ghee; (5) the *Shway Oo Au* from Rangoon with 800 jars, 1 coyan of rice, 7.5 piculs of fish maws, and 2 piculs of Buffalo hides; and (6) an unnamed "native" vessel from Moulmein with 11 coyans of rice, 15 piculs of cutch, 3 boxes of tea, 10,000 birds' nests, 3 piculs of fish maws, and 2 chests of opium (PGSC 6 April 1844, p. 3). Even then, imports by "native craft," indicating any local unregistered boat (whether Chinese or not), would substantially raise the amount of "bird trade" items in the overall trade; take, for example, the unregistered "native craft" that brought 176,000 birds' feathers from Tavoy to Penang in mid-April 1844 (PGSC 20 April 1844, p. 3).

### B. Tin-mining:

Prior to the explosion of Burma's Rangoon-centred rice economy in the late nineteenth century, there were smaller scale economic bursts in British Arakan and the Tenasserim Coast.<sup>6</sup> The state-orientation of colonial historiography fostered the view that the growth of the Tavoy and Mergui economies was the result of the British conducted colonial development. Archival sources also share this perspective and it is probably the case that the former perspective flowed from the latter. Archival sources also indicate, however, and this is something that is not discussed in the literature on the earlier, pre-Rangoon-centred colonial economy in Burma, that Chinese entrepreneurs were at the same time filling economic niches in view of the growing colonial economy on the one hand but more importantly, developments in the overall Asian economy. The state-centred approach also does not interrogate these "Chinese" mentioned in the sources and assumes that they are the result of developments within the boundaries of what became British Burma. By doing so, the state-centred approach attempts to reaffirm the uniqueness of the Burmese experience for the Chinese.

Penang and Lower Burma Overseas Chinese shippers had several reasons to be attracted to the

possibility of extracting tin from Tavoy. In addition to its commercial value, it was also suitable as ballast for western-style ships that had discharged their cargoes (required to prevent the ship from keeling over). Although sand was often employed, sand would be emptied in the harbour if the harbour-master was not keeping careful watch, but could not be sold. Using tin was ideal, because it could be alternated as cargo when the ship needed to be in ballast. Even with a cargo load of size but not weight, the high mass-size ratio of tin allowed balance was attractive (See, for example, PRM, 10 September 1828, p. 2). Overseas Chinese merchants in Penang and Lower Burma thus represented a strong demand for a close supply of tin (PRM, 23 January 1828, p. 1). Tavoy was both close and not yet dominated by the Chinese mine-barons who came to control the supply of tin in lower portions of the Malay peninsula.

From a non-Malaysian-centred approach, however, different connectivities and understandings emerge. In the discussion on the potentialities for economic development in Tavoy and Mergui, for example, one unpublished 1826 colonial report refers to the movement of Chinese into both areas:

"Tin is procurable along the whole range of hills in both Provinces the ore is obtainable without much difficulty and parties of Chinese are now entering into Engagements to work the mines the produce [of which] . . . will ultimately become an article of Trade at these ports" (Commissioners' Reports 1826a, p. 84-5).

It appears that these "parties of Chinese" were coming to Tavoy and Tenasserim from the lower Malay peninsula, gathered by *kangchu* or *kangchu*-like labor procurers. One such *kangchu* hopeful was Low Ah Chong ("Lowe Achong" in the text), who repeatedly made known his plans to gather a thousand Chinese from Melaka as a labor gang and to bring them to Tavoy to work the tin mines (Commissioners' Reports 1826b, p. 41).

The mines never became an overwhelming success and Tavoy and Mergui never became another Kedah. But as human migration and economic developments, the attempts at tin-mining in Tavoy and Mergui are more easily understood by their relationship to broader trends of Chinese labor and tin-mining in the Malay Peninsula than they are from within the borders of British Burma. They also hint at connectivities that do not appear in the nation-state approaches to Burma and the Chinese therein. The early connection appears to have been Melaka, for Chinese tin-mining labor, but there were also other points of connection. Parallel with the labor migration connection between Melaka and Tavoy, was the emergence of another kind of connection between Tavoy and Mergui and Penang. In addition to a growing trade between these areas and Penang, "several Praws and Junks are building for the use of the Chinese inhabitants of [Penang]" (Commissioners' Reports 1826a, p. 105).

Early British administrators did not really know how to deal with these autonomous movements of Chinese in Southeastern Burma. They certainly knew that they did not want Chinese economic communities on the scale of Penang and Singapore, or the autonomy of Chinese communities in the Malay peninsula. One early colonial administrator, for example, advised the colonial regime to fend off a long-term Chinese presence:

"[T]he Propensity to combination, exclusion of others and spirit of monopoly which characterizes the Chinese must therefore be guarded against at the outset, and it would certainly be advisable that the great proportion of workers at the mines should consist of our Burmese inhabitants[,] the temporary employment of Chinese workmen as the most ready and expert might indeed be convenient at present[,]but Temporary convenience would be dearly purchased in the certain result that we must ever after depend on expensive foreign labour instead of the cheaper work of our own natural subject" (Commissioners' Reports, 1826a, p. 38).

Of course, these feelings were double-sided, as this same report also included sentiments that

allowing the Chinese to work in the mines might set a good example for the Burmese to do the same (Commissioners' Reports, 1826a, p. 38). Other contemporary observers agreed: "An increase of [Tavoy's] Chinese population is much desired and not despaired of, since various productions of the neighbourhood are capable of inviting and rewarding their industry" (PRM, 9 April 1828, p. 1).

The non-state-centred approach allows us to see these developments that would otherwise be invisible to the nation-state approach for a number of reasons. I think one reason is that these developments fit a general pattern of autonomous or semi-autonomous Chinese tin-mining *kongsi* throughout the Malay Peninsula and elsewhere that is in stark contrast to Rangoon-focused narratives of colonial Burmese history. A more important reason, however, is that the state-centred narrative won out over the archival materials in the context of the emergence of a strong colonial state in British Burma and the emergence of different kinds of Chinese communities in the same. Chinese tin-mining efforts and their boat-building connections are left out of the narrative, while a situation in reverse of the perception found in the archival materials takes centre-stage.

### C. Rice Trade:

Although substantial attention has been paid to Overseas Chinese economic activities within colonial boundaries, such as between Penang and Kedah, and Singapore and Johore, for example, the Hokkien role in trade across colonial divisions, between Penang and Singapore, on the one hand, and Rangoon, on the other, have not. Penang and Singapore had by the mid-nineteenth century, become the chief entrepôts in western Southeast Asia for Chinese goods and produce, while Rangoon was fast approaching Akyab as western Southeast Asia's rice export centre. Prior to 1852, Burmese rice had been shipped directly to Penang and Singapore from Akyab for twenty-five years (Charney 1999). In 1852, however, the British opened up Rangoon from Burmese court restrictions on rice exports and its exports grew faster than established rice merchants were able to corner.

The rice trade multiplied the commercial and social interconnections between the Overseas Chinese of Penang and of Lower Burma. The movement between Penang and Singapore, on the one hand, and Rangoon, on the other, for example, fostered a triangulation of extended trade in rice between Rangoon (replacing Akyab by the 1880s), Penang-Singapore, and Amoy. This provided opportunities for young Chinese merchants. As a result, throughout the last half of the nineteenth century and into the twentieth century a large number of Hokkien merchants moved back and forth between Penang, Singapore, and Rangoon. The Chinese role in the Penang to Singapore portion of the Burmese rice trade, for example, can be seen in Table 2, which indicates significant Overseas Chinese involvement. This involvement gave the Overseas Chinese considerable economic clout and leverage in Penang and Burma. In April 1844, for example, Penang's Chinese merchants held the principal part of "considerable stocks" of rice imported from western Burma, but refused to sell it in order to drive up prices (PGSC 13 April 1844, p. 4).

**Table 2. Overseas Chinese Merchant Shipments of Arakanese Rice on Western Square-rigged Vessels from Penang to Singapore, 1851 Season**

Month	Ship	Registration	Rice Cargo	Owner of Cargo
January	?	?	1,400 piculs	Kim Yapsoon
February	La Felice	British	44 coyans	Lim Choon
March	Mary	British	36 coyans	Ngheo Watt
March	Samdanny	British	55 coyans	Swee Watt
June	Samdanny	British	48.5 coyans	Lim Ee

Source: (Charney 1999)

It should also be stressed that Overseas Chinese from Penang mainly became involved in this rice trade after the 1850s, that is after the British acquisition of Lower Burma in 1852. Prior to that much of the Lower Burma (considered here separately from both Arakan and Southeastern Burma) rice trade seems to have been in the hands of Portuguese and Indian merchants.<sup>7</sup> This is important because it indicates that the involvement of the Overseas Chinese in Lower Burma broadened and deepened as the nineteenth-century progressed, a contrast with the picture of a Penang Chinese community in eclipse.

The rapid growth of this trade meant that by the beginning of the twentieth century nearly all the major Overseas Chinese merchants of Lower Burma and Penang somehow and at least to some degree had their hands and their fortunes in some aspect of the rice market, either as landlords, money-lenders, millers, shippers, marketeers, or labor-brokers. Yeo Kay, for example, came to Penang from Xiamen in 1859. He worked for a Chinese firm, probably Hokkien, until 1862, when he opened his own business (chop Heng Moh) connecting Burmese rice with silk and Chinese produce. Hokkien traders like Yeo Kay benefited from their flexibility, or willingness to respond quickly to new and different changes in the market. These changes included the rising price in landed property as Rangoon grew rapidly as a trading port. By the early 1880s, for example, after Yeo Kay had made his fortune in the rice and Chinese goods trade, he used his profits to invest in land and houses and began to trade in English salt. Chan Ma Phee, another Hokkien trader, came first to the Straits Settlements (circa 1871) and then (circa 1873) left the Straits Settlements to trade in piece-goods in Upper Burma. In 1883, he established in Rangoon, Taik Leong, a firm that dealt in rice and paddy, as well as oil and tobacco. He invested his fortune into land and, building houses, turned this land into highly profitable rental properties. By 1894, and for five years thereafter, he emerged as the largest Chinese trader in rice in Burma. The Gwangdung trader, Eng Lone Shan, followed a similar pattern. Born in Gwangdung, he moved to Penang, but then shifted to Rangoon in 1872 as a building contractor. In 1886, however, he became the managing partner of Lon Shain Lone & co., a rice-milling firm (Wright, Cartwright, & Breakpear, 1910, 312-314). Burmese rice, in short, became the common denominator in the fortunes of many of the successful Penang-connected Rangoon Chinese merchants.

But trade is a two-way relationship and in some ways return cargoes also strengthened the Chinese cultural character of Overseas Chinese interaction between Penang and Rangoon. In return for rice shipments, for example, the Overseas Chinese in Penang supplied items necessary for the emerging Overseas Chinese community in Lower Burma. These items were specifically the produce or manufactured goods from China. This is indicated by a glance at the cargoes of several Burma-bound ships moving out from Penang's harbor during one week in April 1844: (1) an unregistered "native vessel," carried from Penang to Rangoon a cargo of 3 baskets of China tobacco, 19 boxes of Chinese crackers, 8 boxes of China sundries, 80, 867 pieces of Chinaware, 20 China jars, 1420 umbrellas, 17 boxes of betelnut, and five cakes of opium, amongst other miscellaneous items; (2) another unregistered "native vessel" carried from Penang to Tavoy 30,000 pieces of Chinaware, 500 umbrellas, 2 boxes of tea, 10 boxes of betelnut, among other miscellaneous items; and (3) the British registered *Shway Au Oo* carried from Penang to Rangoon 40 piculs of betelnut, 40 piculs of leaf tobacco, 100 umbrellas, and other goods and produce (PGSC 20 April 1844, p. 3). These are not exceptional cargoes: shipments of Chinaware, China sundries, and crackers appear as regular cargo from Penang to Burma (PGSC 18 May 1844, p. 3).

### Conclusion

Generally, state-centred historical narratives have hampered our attempts to understand the Overseas Chinese on two levels. First, China-centred historical narratives both emphasized too strongly the China-centred social, economic, and cultural orientation of at least some Overseas Chinese groups from too early a period, creating the problem of *exuberances*, reading too much into "Chinese" as an ethnic and not a locative (even then of doubtful usefulness) identity from too early a period. On another level, by placing too much emphasis on reading history through narratives centred around contemporary Southeast



Asian states, there is also the problem of *deficiencies*, only looking a fraction of an artificially-divided phenomenon.<sup>8</sup> One could even argue that Southeast Asian state-centred historical analyses are guilty of exuberances by incorporating two very different groups (today and in the past), the Yunnanese Chinese and the Southeastern Chinese, into a single "Chinese in Burma" community.

Dropping the nation-state-centred framework from our analysis reveals some of the trade connectivities which crossed over colonial boundaries and interlinked not only the ports of the Straits and Lower Burma, but also connected these ports to Southeastern China. Trade connectivities formed a world of interactions that saw capital, commodity, and labor flows that moved across colonial boundaries. These constellations of connections often overlapped one another, and thus require different kinds of approaches than those required of nation-state framed analyses, such as the focus on intersections. When considered in a broader context, these connectivities appear to substantiate assertions that an analytical reconfiguration of our regionalisation—or compartmentalisation—of Asia east of the Indian subcontinent into "East Asia" and "Southeast Asia" is needed (Liu 2000).

Although analyses using the nation-state approach tend to obscure these processes, by the early twentieth century, the nation-state framed the perceptions of not only the British and the Burmese, but also the Overseas Chinese themselves. By the beginning of the twentieth century, the colonial state was an undeniably powerful force in Burma and it is not surprising that its influence has also extended over the historical narrative. Early twentieth-century Rangoon Chinese who began to write about the Chinese past, and the Chinese identity, and so on, could not but inscribe into their narratives of the early years of (colonial) Chinese settlement in Lower Burma with the same hegemony of British rule that they saw in the colonial state of their own time. As Taw Sein Ko, a Chinese born in Burma believed, in direct contrast to the information from the archival sources mentioned above, that Chinese settlement in Burma had been British-inspired:

"It should also be remembered that, in a certain sense, the Chinese are the honoured guests of the British Government and deserve every consideration at the hands of the authorities. After the First Anglo-Burmese War of 1824 . . . they were invited by the Honourable East India Company to settle in Tenasserim . . . and promote [its] commercial prosperity. . . (Taw 1920a [1918], p. 131)."

By removing the nation-state as the framework for our analyses, and looking at trade connectivities such as Akyab-Penang-China and Tenasserim-Penang-China, the apparent economic hegemony of Singapore and Rangoon during much of the nineteenth century begins to lessen. Certainly, Akyab and Penang are by no means the economic powerhouses that Rangoon and Singapore became in the twentieth century, but the understanding of this development, the transition from a multiplicity of Burma-Straits-China economic centres to Rangoon and Singapore had important ramifications for the Overseas Chinese communities that lined the Straits and Lower Burma. One result, for example, was another migration of Chinese from Penang to Rangoon and Singapore, that reflected the early-mid nineteenth century migration of Chinese from Melaka to Penang (and Singapore) and Tenasserim. Another result was the economic isolation and impoverishment of Chinese left behind in these communities.

In sum, when looking at the commercial and economic relationships of the Overseas Chinese, the non-state-centred approach has certain advantages over the nation-state-centred approach. Unlike the state-centred approach, for example, the non-state-centred approach identifies trade connectivities that are hidden from the view of the spectator sitting in that section of the stand roped off by the nation-state: it does not obscure a special sort of connectivities that have not been sufficiently examined. At the same time it helps to offset the over-privileging of trade connectivities that occur within areas later bounded by postcolonial nation-states, such as between Penang and Kedah, or between two affiliate nation-states such as Singapore and Johore.

There is a tension between seeing the Overseas Chinese from within, and seeing them without.

Borders of the nation-state have defined the overlap of two distinct and sometimes irreconcilable perspectives: the world of the Overseas Chinese as perceived by the Overseas Chinese, and the world of the Overseas Chinese as perceived by the nation-state. When we look at the Overseas Chinese along the Straits and the Coasts of Lower Burma, then, it is more useful to remove a nation-state-centred framework from our analysis. But, even then, the nation-state cannot be ignored as a powerful actor in the historical development of the Overseas Chinese communities in the Straits and Lower Burma.

# Appendix:

Table 1. First Generation Chinese Migrant Merchants in Early Twentieth Century Burma

Name	Birthplace	When Left	Intermediate Stop	Place of Final Settlement	When Settled in Burma
1. Chan Ma Phee	Xiamen	c. 1871	Straits Settlements	Rangoon	1873
2. Chan Thye	Gwangdung	unknown	Penang	Rangoon	late 19th c.
3. Chin Ah Pawn	Gwangdung	unknown	unknown	Rangoon	late 19th c.
4. Choa Chuan Ghoick	Melaka	1860s	—	Rangoon	1860s
5. Eng Lone Shan	Gwangdung	—	Penang	Rangoon	1872
6. Eu Poon Guan	Penang	—	Rangoon	Perak	—
7. Haw War Kain	Gwangdung	—	Singapore	Rangoon	late 19th c.
8. Khoo Jeow	Xiamen	1860	Penang	Rangoon	1869
9. Koh Ban Pan	Xiamen	1872	—	Rangoon	1872
10. Lee Ah Phoy	Gwangdung	1856	Penang	Rangoon	1866
11. Lee Nie Hee	Gwangdung	1865	—	Rangoon	1865
12. Leong Chye	Gwangdung	1858	—	Moulmein	1858
13. Leong Ah Choo	Gwangdung	1876	—	Moulmein	1876
14. Leong ?	Gwangdung	—	—	Moulmein	?
15. Leong Hain Kee	Gwangdung	?	Hongkong	Rangoon	1875
16. Lim Cheng Taik	Penang	1850s	—	Rangoon	1850s
17. Lim Po Eng	Penang	1877	—	Rangoon	1877
18. Lim Soo Hean	S. China	1860s	—	Rangoon	1860s
19. Loke Ah Shain	Gwangdung	—	—	Rangoon	1870s (?)
20. Moay Ah Shain	Gwangdung	1870	—	Bassein	1870
21. Moay Htoun	?	—	Rangoon	Penang	1860s
22. Peh Beng Teng	Xiamen	1861	Penang	Rangoon	1870
23. Tan Boon Tee	Xiamen	1861	—	Rangoon	1861
24. Tan Boon Ban	Xiamen	—	—	Rangoon	1860s (?)
25. Tan Chong Yan	Singapore	1885	—	Rangoon	1885
26. Tan Chit Pyan	Xiamen	1870	—	Rangoon	1870
27. Tan Ho	Xiamen	1856	—	Rangoon	1856
28. Tan ?	Xiamen	Prior to 1808	—	Moulmein	prior to 1808
29. Yeo Teck	Xiamen	1868	—	Rangoon	1868
30. Yeo Poon Mya	Xiamen	1880s (?)	Singapore & Penang	Rangoon	—
31. Yeo Poon Ayi	Xiamen	—	—	Rangoon	late 19th c.
32. Yeo Eng Byan	Xiamen	1850s	—	Rangoon	1850s
33. Yeo Kay	Xiamen	1859	Penang	Rangoon	1862

Source: (Wright, Arnold & Cartwright, H. A. 1908 & Wright, Arnold, Cartwright 1910).

NOTES:

- 1 The author has conducted on-site fieldwork and oral interviews for this paper in Burma, Malaysia, and Singapore. Written materials for this paper were gathered from the National Archives of the Republic of Singapore, the library of the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (Singapore), and microfilmed holdings of the Colonial Office (Great Britain) in the Central Library of the National University of Singapore and the National Archives. I am thankful to these institutions for their help. I would also like to thank Liu Hong and Michael Montesano (both of the National University of Singapore), and Atsuko Naono (University of Michigan), for their helpful comments and suggestions.
- 2 This information comes from personal interviewees of Chinese in Yangon's Chinatown that I conducted in February 2000. One of my interviewees, for example, stressed the link between the Yunnanese Chinese to drug-wealth, while the Chinese of Yangon, he stressed, suffered economically.
- 3 To give one brief example, Koh Ban Pan, the Xiamen merchant who came to Rangoon in 1872 was a devout Buddhist and a patron of Chinese temples at Penang, which he presumably visited (Wright, Cartwright, & Breakspear 1910, 316).
- 4 These observations are drawn from Leonard Blusse's comments as panel chair at the International Workshop on Maritime China & the Overseas Chinese in Transition, 1750-1850, Singapore, 26 (25-27) November 1999.
- 5 One English newspaper, for example, stressed Penang's 'inadequacies' in 1828: "We find four Chinese junks already arrived at Singapore this season, while poor Penang cannot yet boast of one: a pretty good indication of the commercial advantage that Island has over us in point of situation" (PRM, 28 March 1828, p. 1).
- 6 The British had defeated Burma in 1824 and 1825, and had formally annexed Tenasserim, Tavoy, and Mergui by the end of 1825.
- 7 This observation begs deeper investigation, being based here upon a survey of published shipping records from the pre-1850s. See, for example, the vessels listed as destined for Arakan in the "shipping in the harbour" for Penang in April 1844 (PGSC 6 April 1844, p. 3). It may be possible that Overseas Chinese were involved in the Portuguese and Indian portion of the Lower Burma rice trade as owners of ships, intermediary merchants, or even as suppliers. I tentatively suggest that this latter scenario is doubtful.
- 8 I have utilized here A. L. Becker's useful ethno-linguistic dichotomy—"exuberances" and "deficiencies," regarding the problems facing those who translate literature from one language into another (Becker 1989).

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